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AUTHOR	Malen, Betty; Croninger, Robert; Redmond, Donna; Muncey, Donna
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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an analysis of the "theories of action" embedded in reconstitution reforms. Reconstitution is a reform strategy in which all, or a large percentage, of a school's incumbent administrators and teachers are replaced with educators presumed to be more capable and committed. The report is based on evidence acquired from a 2-year study that documented what may actually happen when reconstitution occurs. Exploratory case studies of three reconstituted schools (one middle, two elementary) in a single district provided the primary data for the report. The findings reveal stark contradictions between the theories of action embedded in the reform and the actual experiences with the reform. These patterns suggest that the reconstitution initiatives may reflect some of the fundamental tensions embedded in two different and incompatible approaches to reform. Although reconstitution would seem to fall clearly in the control camp, the rendition of reconstitution that was examined turned out to be a hybrid reform that combined tenets of control strategies with tenets of commitment strategies. In essence, the district was to be both the punitive and supportive agent. The act of reconstitution implicitly blamed site participants for the condition of schools. Promises of substantial support never materialized. (Contains 25 references.) (RJM)

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Uncovering the Potential Contradictions in Reconstitution Reforms
A Working Paper

by

Betty Malen
Robert Croninger
Donna Redmond
Donna Muncey

Interdisiplinary Study Team
College of Education
University of Maryland, College Park

Prepared for the annual conference of the University Council for Educational Administration, held in Minneapolis, MN, October, 1999.

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Select state governments and local districts have begun to embrace "reconstitution" as an education reform strategy (Mintrop, in press). This strategy involves removing a school's incumbent administrators and teachers (or large percentages of them) and replacing them with educators who, presumably, are more capable and committed. The underlying assumption is that somehow, the replacement of personnel and the promise of a "fresh-start" will translate into substantive organizational innovations and meaningful school improvements. Whether cast as threat or promise, reconstitution is advanced as a radical, "results-based" accountability reform that might "turn around" highly troubled schools.[1] But, like other initiatives that purport to hold schools accountable for their performance and, in so doing, to transform them into institutions that provide high-powered learning experiences for all students, reconstitution is a prevalent but under-studied strategy (Henig, et al., 1999; Ladd, 1996; Stone, 1998).

In this paper, we offer a preliminary analysis of the "theories of action"[2] embedded in reconstitution reforms in light of evidence acquired from a two-year study that documents what may actually happen when reconstitution occurs.[3] Exploratory case studies of three reconstituted schools (one middle, two elementary) in a single district provide the primary data for this analysis. The findings reveal stark contradictions between the "theories of action" embedded in the reform and the actual experiences with the reform. These patterns suggest that the reconstitution initiative, like other education reform strategies, may reflect some of the fundamental tensions embedded in two very different, arguably incompatible approaches to reform, namely the commitment and control strategies identified and discussed by Rowan (1990) and generally linked to professional and bureaucratic perspectives on organizations, including schools (Conley, 1988; Conley, et al., 1988). Although reconstitution reforms would seem to fall clearly, in the control camp, the rendition of reconstitution we examined turned out to be a hybrid reform that combined tenets of control strategies with tenets of commitment strategies. As such, it offers a potentially instructive basis for examining issues associated with efforts to "blend and balance" these strategies.

We begin with background information about the study, the reform context and the reform features, including the "theories of action" embedded in the reform actions. Then we focus on three general tensions that became very evident as the reconstitution reform unfolded. Finally, we discuss these broad tensions in light of two "alternative strategies for the organizational design of schools," notably, commitment and control (Rowan, 1990).

The Study

General Design

Because reconstitution reforms represent unchartered terrains, the study reported here was conceived as an open-ended search for

intended and unintended effects of reconstitution as well as a more focused search for evidence regarding the "theories of action" embedded in this reform strategy. Like other policies, reconstitution initiatives rest on a set of assumptions regarding the relationship between policy actions and policy outcomes. These inter-related, often implicit assumptions form a conceptual map, a way of arraying the underlying logic that links the actions taken with the outcomes sought. These underlying assumptions or "theories of action" can be instructive ways of looking at education reforms because they help one both identify and inspect the premises of the policy (Malen, Ogawa & Kranz, 1990) In short, the study sought to describe what actually happens when schools are reconstituted and to generate insights regarding the premises and promises of this initiative as an education reform strategy.

Data Sources and Methods

The three exploratory case studies were based on documentary, interview and observational data collected by an interdisciplinary research team. The first phase of data collection was carried out between March and July of 1998 and focused on the enactment and initial implementation of the reconstitution reform. The second phase of data collection was carried out between August of 1998 and August of 1999 and focused on the ongoing implementation of this reform. The final phase of data collection involves follow-up conversations to correct or corroborate the major themes we have identified and interviews that track the ongoing "staffing changes" in the schools. That phase will be completed in December of 1999.

Documentary Data. Documents reviewed include formal policy statements issued by the state, district and site; school improvement plans; district-generated reports on previous and current reform ventures, teacher characteristics, and teacher turnover; district transmitted instructions for developing school improvement plans and complying with state and district testing requirements; district and site based reports on school climate and student achievement; press releases; official correspondence between district and site actors; teacher journals, logs and files of district and site employees; budget proposals; agendas and minutes of district and site meetings that focused on the reconstitution reform; school calendars and school schedules; staff development program materials; PTA meeting agendas and site generated newsletters, fliers and internal memos. These documents were used to develop an understanding of the district context, to clarify the formal policy provisions, including resources allocated to the reform effort, to trace how select issues were being handled, and to correct or corroborate information secured from other sources.

Interview Data. During the first phase of the study, interview data were acquired from more than 100 conversations with district administrators, building administrators, classroom teachers, program specialists and support staff. The interview

pool was comprised of men and women of different races and ethnicities. It included displaced teachers, new hires, returning teachers and instructional specialists from all grade levels, departments and categorical programs. Most interviews were semi-structured exchanges that lasted from 30 minutes to three hours but averaged about one and one-half hours. The semi-structured interviews were augmented by informal exchanges which ranged from 10 minutes to more than 2 hours, but averaged about fifty-five minutes.

During the second phase of the study, interview data were acquired from over 200 formal and informal interviews with district and site educators, and 36 interviews with parents and community residents who were involved as PTA members and/or volunteers in the schools. The vast majority of interviews were semi-structured exchanges that ranged from 20 minutes to three hours, with most falling between 45 and 90 minutes. At the elementary schools, the interview pool included all administrators and nearly all teachers and specialists. At the middle school, the interview pool included administrators and a cross-section of teachers. In all cases, the pools were comprised of men and women of different races and ethnicities who varied in terms of their years of experience as educators and their length of employment at the reconstituted schools.

Throughout both phases of the study, interviews were typically conducted with individuals, but were occasionally carried out with small groups. Nearly all interviews were taped. In all cases, detailed notes were taken. Interviews were used to secure information about the forces precipitating the enactment of the reconstitution reform, educators' expectations of and experiences with the reform during the first year of implementation, and educator, parent and community perceptions of the reform during the second year of implementation.

Observational Data. Observations of committee meetings, the daily activities of schools (e.g., receptions, special programs, lunchroom conversations) and the material culture of the schools (e.g., building arrangements, graffiti, public signs, bulletin boards, instructional materials, class activities, displays of student work) supplemented the documentary and interview data conducted during the first phase of the study.

During the second phase, observations played a more central role in data collection. Members of the research team conducted over 150 formal and informal classroom observations. In addition, they invested over 350 hours observing various aspects of the schools such as team meetings, faculty meetings, inservice sessions, testing days, special programs, honors assemblies, field days, teacher appreciation events, lunchroom activities, library sessions, as well as the "regular happenings" and the "everyday" staff-student interactions and staff-staff interactions that occur

in the corridors, in the faculty lounges and on the playgrounds of the schools. These observations were used to secure data regarding the correspondence between reform expectations and reform experiences and between site actors' conceptions of school improvement and their efforts to engender it, as well as to correct or corroborate data secured from other sources.

Data Analysis Procedures

Reflecting the inductive character of exploratory case study designs, these data were scrutinized in order to (1) identify prominent patterns as well as exceptions to them, (2) lay out the "chains of evidence" that supported, contradicted or qualified emergent themes and interpretations (Yin, 1984), and (3) develop narrative accounts of the participants' expectations of and experiences with the reform during the first and second year of its implementation.[4] Throughout the data collection and analysis process, the research team worked to corroborate or correct emergent interpretations by checking the detail, accuracy and consistency of information we received from individual interviews and by comparing the extent to which prominent themes were evident in (absent from or challenged by) the information provided by multiple informants who occupied different roles, had different levels of professional experience and who varied along the dimensions of age, race, sex, and ethnicity. We also cross-checked information secured through interviews with observational and documentary data. As a further check for bias and error, the narrative we developed regarding the initial implementation was reviewed by the research team, by key informants and by two colleagues who are knowledgeable about education policy but are not involved in this study (Murphy, 1980). An in progress final report will be subjected to similar informant and collegial scrutiny.

Data Limitations

Although we have a great deal of rich data, there are limitations. First, as the preceding paragraphs make clear, the interview pool is educator dominated. Most information was secured from those who work in schools. The parent/community interviews are limited to those who participate, not those who may be inactive or who may be excluded from participation in the governance or operation of the schools. While those features suggest that we spoke to individuals in the best position to know how the reform was actually unfolding in the schools, the perceptions we secured are not necessarily representative of the broader school community.

Second, we have many indications in field notes that people felt comfortable talking with us; but, we also have instances where informants were reluctant to be interviewed at the school site or reluctant to be interviewed at all. Comments such as "things come back" indicated that some informants did not believe that it was safe to express their views. While there are multiple counter comments such as "no secrets here" or "We feel like we can tell you anything and everything," the signs of reluctance can not be

summarily dismissed. Simply put, we can not be fully confident that we got the "whole story" from all informants even though we secured very detailed and on face candid data from most informants.

Third, information across cases and across categories of interest is uneven. Irrespective of the amount of time spent "in the field," the information secured in different sites and the information secured on particular topics will often vary. Although uneven across cases and categories, the data we secured are fairly comparable across sites and remarkably consistent across researchers. That is, data acquired by different researchers working in the same site are very consistent as are team member interpretations of themes and patterns at the sites where they anchored data collection.

The Reform: Its Context, Features and "Theories of Action"

In late spring, 1997, the district superintendent announced that six schools (4 elementary and 2 middle schools) would be reconstituted. New principals were appointed in five of the six schools. Teachers who wanted to continue to work in those schools, no matter their experience, preference or history, had to (1) reapply for their position, (2) sit for a formal interview with a committee comprised of the new principal, district administrators and/or intermediate level administrators, and (3) accept the verdict of that selection committee. Displaced teachers were guaranteed positions within the district. Staff members who wanted to retain their posts in these schools also had to go through re-selection processes. The documentary and interview data reveal that the district's reconstitution reform was an outgrowth of and a response to a complex web of educational issues, governmental pressures, demographic changes and economic strains (Finkelstein, et al., 1999).

Reform Context

The district has a long-standing and broadly publicized record of low student achievement as gauged by the various district and state tests used to measure the academic accomplishments of students. District leaders, most notably the superintendent, believed that dramatic action was required to secure dramatic change. While documents describing the reform did not specify what instructional changes would occur if schools were reconstituted or why reconstitution would bring about school improvements, the hope was that this sweeping action would improve student performance. But this initiative was precipitated by forces that go well beyond the personal convictions of the superintendent.

For decades, federal legislation and related litigation had focused district attention on desegregation plans and equity issues. In recent years, however, state actions have focused attention on holding schools more accountable for students' academic achievement. The state has pressured the district largely

through the enactment of mandatory state testing policies, threats of state takeovers, and calls for greater accountability, continuous school improvement, implementation of research-based practices, and development of a teacher corp that is fully certified. The state has also exercised oversight by commissioning a special study of district management and appointing a board to monitor district operations. In the minds of many proximate observers, reconstitution was an effort to "preempt" further "encroachments" and punitive actions by the state. Cognizant of the political climate, the superintendent reportedly wanted to act, rather than be "acted upon" by the state.

District responses to the multiple educational issues and governmental pressures have been influenced by demographic and economic conditions. Over the last decade the student population has changed so the district is now a majority minority district. The student population reflects a complex cultural, racial and ethnic mix, growing numbers of ESOL students, and high percentages of African American and Hispanic populations. Like many metropolitan districts, this one has resource constraints. When compared with other districts in the vicinity, this district has relatively high percentages of families in poverty, low teacher salaries, high turn-over rates and high percentages of uncertified or provisionally certified teachers. It has pent up demands for the construction and renovation of school facilities as well as intense demands for improvements in school programs. The district has sought additional funds from the state, but their requests have been only partially honored.

Taken together, these developments have intensified tensions among and between various local constituencies who compete for the limited resources available to support the improvement of schools generally and low performing schools more specifically. To complicate matters further, the competition for resources at times breaks out along racial-ethnic lines. Given this context, the district has been confronted with a host of contentious concerns about the quality and equity of educational opportunities and the relationship of schools and communities. These concerns, and undoubtedly other forces, gave rise to a district reconstitution policy that had several key features.

Reform Features

Unilateral v. Collaborative Action. The reconstitution initiative was a district-level mandate, imposed through agreements between the District Board of Education, the superintendent, the teachers' union, and other authorities external to the building sites. The reform was confined to six schools (four elementary and two middle schools), a relatively small proportion of low-performing schools in the district. The district-articulated criteria for selecting the six schools included low test scores, uneven performance on state-mandated

tests, inadequate attendance, absentee and suspension rates, poverty indicators, diversity factors, and the availability of grant monies at the sites. While it is not clear precisely how these criteria were prioritized and weighted, they reportedly shaped the selection of the schools to be reconstituted. Neither site participants nor community residents were involved in the decision to reconstitute schools or in the selection of schools to be re-staffed. While newly appointed principals were involved in the selection of staff, teachers, parents and community residents were not included in these decisions.

Comprehensive v. Selective Restaffing. As previously indicated, five of the six principals were replaced. All other employees who wished to remain at the school were required to reapply for their positions. There was no systematic effort to remove some and retain others, although select individuals were encouraged to stay in informal conversations with district officials (Finkelstein, et al., 1999).

Explicit v. Presumed Employee Commitment. The district asked all employees hired at the reconstituted schools to make a three-year commitment to the school and to attend special staff development meetings prior to the opening of school as well as during the school year. While the district has long required teachers to invest three years teaching to be considered for tenure in the district, the reform required individuals to make a verbal commitment to remain at the same school for three years.

Modest, Elusive District Support v. Substantial, Sustained Assistance. When the reform was launched, the district created a new office composed of three individuals to serve (a) as mentors to administrators at the school site level; (b) as intermediaries who would link school-based resource requests to district-level authorities who had the power to allocate resources; and (c) as liaisons who would identify college and university-based programs that could serve as sources of information, guidance and support. The district budgeted $1.2 million for three types of support: (1) direct fiscal allocations to the schools; (2) support for staff development and (3) deployment of informational resources through the newly created district office. A relatively small percentage of the resources dedicated to the reform actually flowed to schools in the form of direct fiscal outlays.[5]

The new office was disbanded at the end of the first year. The responsibility for oversight and support was transferred to an established, and, by some accounts, embellished office that monitored school improvement plans and processes in schools that had various "low performing" designations attached to them. Evidence of special allocations, be those discretionary dollars, or other forms of support, also disappeared. Thus site actors talked frequently about being "on our own."

Multiple, Ambitious Aims v. Focused, Incremental Gains. The stated purpose of the reconstitution reform was to "transform" six schools (4 elementary, 2 middle) that had been identified as having persistently low test scores on state achievement tests.[5] But the reconstitution initiative was cast as more than a sign of impatience with or punishment for low test scores. The superintendent described the initiative as "an extraordinary opportunity" for sweeping changes at each school. In formal documents, the superintendent stated: "It is my hope that teachers and support staff will...examine other programs for alternative solutions to solve problems; that they will willingly risk 'breaking the mold' to pose unique and inventive solutions to problems." Thus, the stated aim was not confined to compliance with state standards. These six 'break-the-mold' schools were to be models of school improvement for the district and the state.

To accomplish these ambitious, but general goals, the Superintendent envisioned a school improvement process that (a) involved school staff in the design and implementation of new programs; (b) provided unprecedented professional development and personal growth opportunities;(c) engaged the community in discussions of school priorities and practices; (d) promoted innovation and encouraged alternative solutions to school problems; (e) was supported by all individuals in the school system; (f) used empirical data to assess and evaluate programs and practices; and (g) constantly sought solutions that are in the best interest of children.

Nested "Theories of Action"

The various features of the reconstitution initiative suggest a two-stage strategy of school reform that combines elements of both the "commitment" and "control" strategies discussed by Rowan (1990). The first stage involves mandating sweeping changes in the composition of the school staffs, an action that is consistent with the genre of reform policies that fall under the rubric of "control." The second stage involves engendering a school improvement process that relies heavily on collegial orientations, local capacity, collective ingenuity and collaborative relationships between schools and communities, an approach more closely aligned with central tenets of the "commitment" strategy (Rowan, 1990).

Nested in this two-stage theory are sets of assumptions about whether and how systems might attract and retain highly capable and committed teachers, create a clean slate in troubled schools or offer a "fresh start" to the newly configured staffs, the returning students, and the surrounding communities. These stages also embody a set of assumptions about the opportunities for innovation, about site educators as both the primary sources of as well as the primary solutions to school performance problems and school-community cleavages as well as assumptions

about the ability of a hybrid reform that combines control and commitment perspectives to "transform" troubled schools.

This paper does not unpack every assumption, every link in the chain of argument required to establish the claim that reconstitution might be a reasonable, if not a robust approach to educational improvement. Nor does it highlight every inconsistency that surfaced. Rather the paper focuses on major themes that challenge some of the key assumptions and uses those themes to highlight some of the potential if not inevitable contradictions embodied in the reconstitution reform strategy.

Major Themes

As the reconstitution reform unfolded, many developments exposed contradictions between district requirements and district actions, between the expectations for and experiences with this initiative, and between the central premises of the policy and the actual patterns of practice. Three themes envelop some of the most pervasive and persistent discontinuities we observed.

Staffing Assumptions: Eliciting Commitment - Fostering Exit

A central premise of reconstitution is that requiring all staff to re-apply for their positions can both rid schools of weak staffs and replenish schools with strong staffs. Presumably such an initiative can send signals that prompt highly capable and committed educators to seek positions in schools that have been, in effect, labeled failures. While reconstitution has some general but fleeting appeal, it also engenders intense and lingering discontent. When we compare the actual staffing effects with the anticipated effects, it appears that reconstitution, at least in the form we studied it, is not a dependable strategy for attracting teachers to or retaining teachers in the schools. Rather, it may encourage reputedly effective educators to leave the schools as well as permit reputedly less effective educators to be involuntarily transferred to other sites.

General, Fleeting Appeal. At the outset, some teachers and specialists indicated they were attracted to the notion of a "fresh start," a "new beginning." They were "excited," "eager" to take on what several termed the "awesome challenge of turning a school around." Some were "moved by what the Superintendent said" and believed that "if he gave the schools what he said he would give them, [this school] would be a great place to teach." Some faculty members were encouraged to reapply and were told, in those informal "recruitment conversations" with central office administrators, that the reform "was a great opportunity. Stay. You can really make your mark and get a reputation and build a program." Several teachers reported being encouraged and reassured by these conversations. As one veteran teacher recalled: "It was cast as a real opportunity to make a real

difference for kids ... It was also cast as a way to advance my career ... to get more recognition for what I do." In these and perhaps other ways, the reform held some attraction.

Moreover, when the reconstitution reform was launched, it apparently influenced the employment decisions of some teachers who were new to the district as well as some teachers who had experience in the system. Although many described their decision to join or rejoin the staff as based on a blend of personal and professional factors (e.g., the location of the school, their attachment to the students, and, for those new to the profession, a "firm job offer") some included the reconstitution initiative as one factor in their decision calculations. Amidst the mix of factors shaping employment decisions, the "chance to do something different," "the opportunity to create a model school," "the opportunity to be part of a ground-breaking event," the chance to "see real organizational change" and other appealing features of the initiative "swayed" the decisions of some and weighed heavily on the decisions of others. As one put it: "I would not have returned to this school if the Superintendent hadn't done something like this." Whether the reform was a "tilting factor" or a critical determinant of occupational choices, the perception that the reconstituted schools would be given every opportunity to become distinctive and distinguished schools played a role in some teachers' decisions to join or rejoin the faculty.

But that general appeal was short-lived. When the reform moved beyond the announcement phase, sentiments changed markedly. During the first year, educators in our sample schools became distressed and disillusioned. Many teachers departed (Finkelstein, et al., 1998). During the second year, new hires and returning teachers reported that they joined the faculty or remained at the school for reasons unrelated to the reconstitution reform. While a few new hires indicated they "liked the principal in the interview" or "liked a challenge," most maintained that the reconstitution initiative was "not really explained" or "was not an issue" or "was not a factor for me." Virtually no returning teachers said that the reform had inspired them to remain at the schools. Indeed, some returned in spite of their experience with the reform. Having survived the first year, several said they came back because "it could only get better." Some "felt needed" but added they just wanted to "stay in the same place, in the same school for more than one year." Several identified the three year "unwritten contract" associated with the reform, the "verbal agreement to stay for three years," and the risks associated with trying to transfer as a non-tenured teacher as reasons to stay. These comments, however, reflected more a sense of obligation than enthusiasm. Several comments capture the prevailing sentiments:

> Teachers were sold a bill of goods. If they had known what this was going to be like, they would not have come.

> I came because it sounded good. The way it was billed, I thought I would be working with the best and the brightest. That hasn't happened.... It's a stigma to work at a [reconstituted] school. But I promised them three years, so I'm back.

> My hope was to be working with the cream of the crop.... I thought I would be working with master teachers but we are all pretty new and inexperienced....It's degrading to say you work at a [reconstituted] school. What's worse is that we are missing the point. We are bragging about two little points on [the state tests] but falling behind on what kids really need....I am not sure how long I can get myself to stay here.

Intense, Lingering Discontent. While some educators were attracted by the promise of reform, others were appalled by the action that had been taken. By many accounts, when faculty and staff at the schools learned of the reconstitution reform, they were "shocked", "insulted," "angered," and "deeply hurt." The requirement that <u>all</u> faculty and staff who wished to remain at the school had to reapply was hard to comprehend and to accept. For some, the requirement "made no sense." As two explained:

> How can we be told we are not good enough to teach here but we can still teach somewhere in the [district]? If we are not doing our jobs we should be fired, not transferred.

> If teachers are weak, you can remove them or retrain them or even transfer them...You don't have to annihilate a whole faculty to deal with a few bad apples who may mean well but do not teach well.

For many, the reapplication requirement came across as "disrespectful," "humiliating" and "inhumane" treatment. The prominent perception that "the teachers had all been fired" and that "people who have proven their worth [were required to] beg for their jobs" contributed to "the pain and anguish" many teachers felt at the outset and continue to feel two years later, when they think about how their faculty was "torn apart," "destroyed," "broken up."

While the precise impact of these sentiments on teachers' decisions to reapply for their positions is difficult to gauge, it appears that during the first year, negative sentiments prompted some reputedly excellent teachers to accept positions in other schools. Several comments capture a very prominent view:

> Lots of dedicated professionals who knew the curriculum and the students and had their classroom management strategies in tact left because they would not succumb to the insult; they would not tolerate the disrespect, the mistreatment.

> We lost some wonderful, experienced teachers....We got rid of a few bad ones too, but we lost some real jewels.

In addition, uncertainties about the work environment - what would be happening at the schools, who would be administering the buildings, who would be teaching - prompted some teachers, particularly those who were being recruited by other schools in the district or by other districts, to accept positions in other locales. Whether due to anger, insult, or the uncertainties associated with "not knowing what was going to be happening" or other apprehensions, teachers maintained one early effect of the reform was that "outstanding teachers left" and "outstanding teams were blown apart." In short, for some highly effective as well as less effective teachers, the reform created multiple incentives to leave and virtually no incentives to stay.[7]

The loss of reputedly strong teachers was an unanticipated and recurrent consequence of the reform. At the end of the first year, reputedly effective and potentially "promising" teachers who had been hired or re-hired elected to depart the schools for a number of reasons, including disillusionment with the reconstitution reform (Finkelstein, et al., 1998). At the end of the second year, teachers in several sites also elected to leave for reform-related reasons. Teachers who were initially enthusiastic supporters of the reform have departed because they are "frustrated," "disillusioned," and "depressed." The comments of one capture a prevalent view: "The promises never materialized." Several noted they could still keep their dream of making a real difference for needy kids in other locales. As one said: "I can still work with the same population which I love but be in a district that supports its teachers."

While, as one informant astutely noted, "you never know the whole reason people leave or stay," the reform seems to be a contributing factor for some departures. The evidence is quite clear in some comments. For example, one noted how the loss of a cohesive staff and the frustrations, tensions, and disappointment associated with the reform have been "too much to take....I'm not coming back. It's been a 'push me back over the edge year.'" Another captured the sentiments of most who were exercising the exit option: "I came with high hopes, but we aren't getting anywhere. It has to be better in other counties." While personal reasons, family situations and unspoken forces undoubtedly shape employment decisions, the reconstitution reform seems to continue to be a contributing factor for some departures. To be sure, not all those who have left the schools were stellar teachers. Indeed, some departures were welcomed by administrators and teachers alike. But some if not most who left were characterized by their colleagues and their supervisors as "having real potential." Given the mixed sentiments associated with the reconstitution reform, it is particularly important to look at actual staffing changes. Thus, we turn to those patterns.

Actual v. Anticipated Staffing Changes. The actual staffing patterns stand in stark contrast to the widespread expectation that reconstituted schools would be staffed with experienced educators who would stay at their schools for at least three years. The staffs at the elementary schools are more racially and ethnically diverse (Finkelstein, et al., 1999). Generally speaking, however, the reconstituted staffs are neither experienced nor stable.

During the first year of the reform, five of the six reconstituted schools had principals who were not only new to the school, but also new to the role. In our three sample schools, approximately 75% of the teachers hired during the first year of the reform were new recruits; most were first-year teachers; many were not yet certified and had to enroll in after-school and weekend courses to complete requirements for certification on the district-defined time table (Finkelstein, et al., 1998). During the second year of the reform, the district replaced one of the six principals with another first-year principal. In our three sample schools, more than twenty-five percent of the faculty left for a variety of reasons, including the sense of degradation and betrayal that accompanied the reconstitution reform. That turnover rate might have been higher if teachers had not been concerned about the impact of a request for transfer on their prospects for tenure. Most of their replacements were new, often first-year teachers, some of whom were also working to complete certification requirements through district-sponsored programs.

At the start of the third year, the district replaced the principal that was appointed the previous year and reassigned two other principals. Teacher turnover rates remained high in two of the three sample schools. In these cases, some, and in one case most of the departures reflect the lingering discontent and disillusionment with the reconstitution reform. Once again, replacements, particularly in the elementary schools, tended to be relatively inexperienced, often first-year teachers, some of whom were working to complete certification requirements.

In short, three of the six reconstituted schools have experienced substantial administrative turnover since the initiative was launched. All of our sample sites experienced substantial teacher turnover at the end of the first year. While turnover has subsided in one of our sample sites, it remains an issue in the other two settings.[8] Replacements tend to be drawn from pools of relatively new teachers, rather than from cadres of experienced, master teachers seeking positions in these schools.

Informants expressed concerns about the unanticipated staff changes. One of the most pronounced was that the extensive staff changes undermine the ability to engender commitment to the schools. Commenting on the administrative changes the district made, a principal said: "It just reminds you not to get too

attached to a school. You just never know where you will be, one year to the next." Commenting on the faculty turnover, informants maintained that "we are going in circles....It's like revolving doors." As one administrator captured it: "It's like we are always going back to square one. We have almost as many new teachers this year as the first year. We keep replacing, not advancing." As another explained:

> This school requires true commitment. Unfortunately we are developing a profile here that says 'why commit?' Every year is a first year. We just keep starting over. It is hard to build commitment...It is like we are experimenting, and every year we start over.

What comes through in our data is that reconstitution may be marked more by "exit effects" than "loyalty effects." (Hirschman, 1970). Insofar as the reform affects occupational choices, it may operate as a perverse incentive that gives people more reasons to leave than to stay. As a new teacher put it: "I didn't know about the reform so it had no effect on my decision to come here. If I had known how it was playing out, I would not have come. I'll stay one more year for the tenure clock, but then I am out of here."

These sorts of comments as well as other statements in the data raise real issues regarding how reconstitution reforms may affect staffing, at least when this reform is introduced in a district that has had a history of being unable to fill its classrooms with certified teachers, at a time when teacher shortages rather than surpluses characterize the region, without any material or intrinsic incentives to get experienced teachers to seek or accept positions in these schools, and without the capacity to keep the new hires for an extended period of time. Under these conditions, it may be that reconstitution, in a dramatic effort to elicit commitment, operates to undermine commitment and "manufacture instability" in schools.

Start-Up Assumptions: Clean Slate Aspirations - Real School Conditions

Reconstitution reforms not only embody sets of assumptions about staffing, they also embody sets of assumptions about what newly configured staffs will confront when they come together to redesign their schools. Reconstitution's rhetorical appeal flows, in part, from the assumption that these initiatives will create a "fresh start" for schools. Speaking hypothetically, that claim rings true. Reconstitution's implicit if not explicit intent is to alter substantially, if not to dismantle totally, the organizational infrastructure of schools. The reform seeks to remove people who have done the work of the school and replace them with people who are not familiar with, and hence are not bound to (some would say blinded by) past practices. In essence, the reform "guts" a school in hopes that the reconstituted staff

will create a more effective set of arrangements. But viewing the reform as it played out in the schools we studied, the "fresh start" claim is an illusion. We found no evidence of a "fresh start" in any sense of the term.

At the outset, the reconstitution initiative changed the staff and, in so doing, wiped out much of the schools infrastructure. But the initiative did not attempt to alter any other dimension of the school. The clients, the working conditions and the school contexts were not addressed. The educational problems had not evaporated. There were no "clean slates." Rather, there were real pressures to reinstate processes, procedures and routines that would enable the schools to function as well as real pressures to address the problems that had made the schools eligible for (or vulnerable to) reconstitution. Thus the initiative intensified rather than alleviated challenges confronting the schools.

Since the initiative imposed new demands but did not fundamentally alter working conditions, relationships were strained. Given the multiple pressures site participants were experiencing, it is hardly surprising that they tended to resurrect previous routines and familiar practices rather than develop distinctive organizational routines or stronger organizational infrastructures. While some of the stress associated with the reconstitution reform has subsided, schools in our sample are still struggling to establish the structures, relationships and routines needed to carry out basic, day-to day organizational functions.

Intensification of Challenges. During the first year of the reform school personnel were under heavy pressure to just re-staff the schools and get ready for the opening of school. Given the large number of vacancies that were created by the reconstitution reform and the shortage of certified teachers, reconstituted schools were still trying to fill multiple vacancies the weekend before classes were to begin. Amidst these realities, expectations for designing the schools had to be reigned in. The accounts of an administrator and a teacher illustrate:

> I thought we would be meeting as a staff and talking about how we were going to change the school....[But] they were hiring people 'til like the day before school started .... We didn't know what grade levels we were teaching; closets were not unpacked; there were no reliable class lists; supplies had not been ordered .... It was crazy.
>
> We were still trying to hire people in late August ....We didn't have schedules or room assignments ....We had to put classes in storerooms because we don't have enough classroom space .... We had so many new teachers that had

> never set up a room. They needed a lot of help. Supplies had not been ordered so people didn't have much to work with .... Some of the new teachers were in a real bind and bought stuff with their own money .... It was wild .... Some of us were working around the clock just so we could open school .... Planning? That was a shot in the dark. All we had was test data .... We didn't know the kids, the school .... We didn't have the people we needed or the time we needed to do it right .... We were scrambling and we have been playing catch-up all year.

These vivid accounts illustrate the more general observation that the reconstitution reform "threw the schools into a frenzy." Administrators and teachers alike talked often about the "confusion," "chaos," and "pressure" the initiative generated. They spoke candidly about feeling "swamped," "inundated," and "overwhelmed" by all that had to be done to figure out and carry out the day to day operations of schools. Administrators and teachers across schools talked frequently and consistently about "being swept into a survival mode," "making it through the day," and "avoiding major disasters." Opportunities to "paint the big picture," to develop a collective vision for a "break the mold model of schooling" were, by most if not all accounts, virtually nonexistent.

Clearly, reconstitution intensified demands and created conditions that required site actors to improvise quickly and frequently. Most if not all of the improvisation centered on the resurrection rather than the invention of an organizational infrastructure. There was not sufficient time, energy, information or support to do otherwise (Finkelstein, et al., 1998). Administrators and teachers expressed concerns about the "sheer survival" mode and the "trial and error" character of the year that went well beyond the recurrent references to "frustration," "overload," and "exhaustion." The words of one capture the judgment of many: "Our children can not take another year of trial and error."

Unaltered Work Conditions. When the reconstitution reform was announced, many teachers held high expectations for improvements in their work conditions. Many expected lower class sizes, instructional assistants, ample amounts of interesting and appropriate materials and supplies, substantial if not sophisticated computer supports, and exciting professional development opportunities. Teachers recognized that some of their expectations might be "wishful thinking," but most maintained their expectations were deeply and rightly rooted in "promises" the district had made to teachers in public and private meetings. The uniformity and consistency of their accounts gives credence to the claim that "teachers were led to believe that we'd get a lot of things - veteran teachers, small class sizes, computers, aides, materials - but that is not the

case." School observations confirm that class sizes remain large, even in kindergarten and lower grades and that classroom aides are not present in sufficient numbers to satisfy most informants. Documents, interviews and observations further suggest that professional development programs have been limited in scope and uneven in quality (Finkelstein, et al., 1998).

The reconstitution initiative also carried expectations of skilled leadership at the building level, collaborative relationships among teachers and between teachers and administrators, and organizational climates that are conducive to effective teaching and improved learning. But schools particularly at the outset of reform, were characterized more by strained relationships than healthy climates.

Strained relationships. During the first year of the reform, teachers within and across our sample sites tended to be quite critical of the principals' availability, approachability, visibility in the school and credibility, particularly as an instructional leader. There were also comments and complaints about the clarity, tone and timing of communications, the amount of direction provided by the principals, and their ability to "follow-through." Some informants recognized that principals take the brunt of "foul-ups by the district" and that some of the "miscues" are related to the sheer volume, pace and intensity of work. Still, there were concerns about the principals and their relationship with their faculties during the early stages of the reform. Those concerns persisted. As one summarized, "The issues you wrote about last year are present again this year." While concerns took different forms across the schools, tensions between principals and staffs and tensions among faculty members are evident in all our sample sites.

During the first year of implementation, informants also described tensions among faculty. Teachers talked about "treading lightly," about insulating themselves from the "negativity," often by isolating themselves. As one captured it: "I keep to myself." They talked about resisting the temptation to "get caught up in the whining, the complaining" and about the importance of "learning how to express our concerns in more constructive ways." While faculty often spoke positively about "the sense of community" and the "help and support" they get within their grade-level pods or their programmatic units, assessments of faculty relationships school-wide suggest they remain strained. Classroom teachers as well as special program teachers report that they are "staying in [their] own worlds;" that they "do not want to even know what is going on in other quarters;" that they are "pulling back," "making it a point not to talk to too many people." As one summarized it: "I mind my own business. I come, I teach and I go home."

While there are many sources of stress in the schools, there is evidence the reconstitution initiative has contributed to the strained relations. In several schools informants maintained that the previous faculty had been a cohesive group, or, at least a more cohesive group than the newly configured faculty (Finkelstein, et al., 1998). In these settings, informants maintained that reconstitution had undermined the sense of community in schools. As one explained:

> We were making progress when they decided to come in and do the change. Faculty worked as a family. We were a close knit family. We helped each other. When they broke up the family things went downhill at this school and it has gone downhill since. They should have left us here, maybe sent a new administrator and left the old teachers here who were working together and who were supporting each other. We don't have that now....We have new people and I guess it is hard for them to join in and say we are a family. The old staff was together for quite a while and we knew each other, understood each other and helped each other, respected each other and now there is lack of communication with people in the building. There are teachers--some of them you don't even know who they are.

Others concurred. Some veteran educators attributed the "uneasiness" among faculty to "not understanding why some of our colleagues who had wanted to stay were not asked back .... It seemed rather arbitrary at times." They added: "Some of us resent the fact that our faculty got blown apart ... that people we liked to work with are not here anymore."

New and returning teachers identified additional plausible explanations - the sheer number of new people, the limited time available for developing relationships, the difficulty of finding time to "just talk, person to person," the perception that individuals may "have their own agendas," the absence of "a collective agenda ... a clear sense of where we were going and how we were to get there," and the tendency to talk about in lieu of talking to one another. Administrators and teachers add that the confusion about roles and responsibilities that accompanies such sweeping staff changes is a major source of strain. There is also some evidence that the tensions reflect deeper issues rooted in fundamentally opposing views of appropriate educational programs, and in matters of race and culture. [9]

In terms of faculty-student relations, site participants did not expect the reconstitution initiative to eliminate discipline problems but they did expect to have the instructional resources and supports and the smaller class sizes which would enable then to work effectively with students. Since those expectations were unrealized, site participants invested considerable time and energy re-instituting systems to deal with student discipline, a

problem that may have been exacerbated by the reconstitution reform.

For example, some elementary teachers commented that during the first year of implementation, students had teased or taunted teachers about "being fired." Several believed that the initiative undermined the respect accorded to teachers and re-staffed schools with novice teachers who may not have their classroom management skills well-honed. Not unexpectedly, the problem emerged as more acute in the middle school. Veteran teachers explained that an influx of new teachers could intensify discipline problems because students are inclined to "test" new teachers. As one explained: "If you come back you gain their respect, but before that there is a lot of testing." Another tenured teacher thought the reform may have sent the wrong signal to students because "[Some students] believed that they got everyone fired." If that is an accurate perception, the initiative may have inadvertently undermined adult authority in the schools and otherwise encouraged students to misbehave. While discipline, at least on the surface, is generally viewed as "much improved" since the reconstitution reform was implemented in our sample elementary schools, it remains a major concern in the middle school we have been studying.

Resurrection of Familiar Practices. Given the circumstances site actors confronted during the first year of reconstitution, it is hardly surprising that they tended to revert to prior, familiar practices rather than develop "fresh" approaches to the organization and operation of schools. Multiple literatures, most notably those rooted in the "street-level bureaucracy" tradition (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977; Lipsky, 1980), would predict that the newly configured staffs would reintroduce the same general calendars, student groupings, discipline systems, grade-level structures, and instructional team configurations that characterized the school prior to reconstitution or that were familiar to those who found themselves having to re-establish an infrastructure so that the schools could function. Although several schools did make schedule adjustments, those changes were not sustained. As several individuals, commenting on the first year of reform explained:

> We've spent a lot of time setting up systems [for discipline, record keeping, scheduling and other basic operations] .... It hasn't been a total disaster, but it has been difficult because we are all reinventing the wheel.
>
> We were all shooting in the dark .... When that happens you go back to what you know .... We went back to things we had done before, to the things we knew how to do .... There was a lot of pressure on people who had some experience at the school .... We needed to learn how things had been done.

> We spent the whole year trying to get back to where we were before reconstitution.

The pattern of administrative reassignments and staff departures raises concerns about whether site actors will be essentially forced to focus on reinstating an infrastructure over and over again. The large gap between the "fresh-start" expectations and the "real-school" experiences is one of the reasons many educators continue to feel betrayed by the district and disappointed in the reform. Comments made at the end of the second year of the reform capture a prominent sentiment:

> I was here before and after. The [reconstitution] reform didn't advantage this school. It was one big upheaval. We continue to go in circles. We take some baby steps but mostly it's been a disruption we could have all done without.

Program Assumptions: The Promise of Innovation - The Press for Standardization

A critical assumption of reconstitution reform is that the changes in staffing will precipitate widespread changes in the instructional program of schools. Administrators and teachers at the sites we studied generally agreed that the charge (and challenge) of the reconstitution initiative was to create "state of the art" schools. They believed innovative orientations, processes and practices were to be the hallmark of reconstituted schools. For a variety of understandable reasons, curricular and instructional innovations have been modest in scope and duration. One of the key reasons for limited innovation is the press for standardization that has been fueled by what informants term the "imperative of improving test scores."

Marginal, Uneven Innovation. Administrators as well as new and veteran teachers repeatedly said their schools were "no different than any other school" they had been part of as student teachers or staff members. The comments of one capture the prevailing view:

> We have a new title ... there is a lot of talk, we have no new, compelling curriculum or pedagogy .... We were all just trying to survive .... Don't get me wrong. We have made some progress this year in spite of it all. But we are not a new, innovative, forward-looking school .... We are no model for the 21st Century.

In part because site personnel had to focus time and attention on recreating systems to handle the day-to-day operations of schools, they did not institute major school-wide changes in the instructional program. They had little time to prepare for a routine opening let alone to create, amidst the confines of district and state instructional requirements and

regulations, a different or distinctive instructional program. Moreover, schools received few if any resources and multiple "mixed signals" from district offices and, at times, the building principals. Under these conditions both experienced and inexperienced teachers struggled "just to survive." Further, the high percentage of new teachers meant that the newly configured staffs did not have much experience translating their instructional understandings into classroom practices. While informants noted that many if not most of the newly hired faculty "had real promise," administrators and instructional supervisors reported that the relative inexperience of teachers "decreases the alternatives they have available to offer the instructional and management repertoires to create order in the classroom."

Our data are replete with references to the struggles new and veteran teachers faced as they tried to simultaneously open the school, master the required curriculum and develop innovative programs and practices. Select but representative comments from new and veteran teachers illustrate:

> Those who launched this reform thought that the teachers would bring new ideas. But we don't even have the basics.
>
> Teachers skim off the top...They are new. They don't know the curriculum.... They have a long way to go on instruction and basic classroom management.
>
> I don't think some of our teachers know the content and I don't think they know how to teach concepts or how to do planning...They don't know the curriculum. They are flying by the seat of their pants. They are having a hard time.... The problems are across the board. Teachers are floundering. The kids deserve better.
>
> I hear teachers say that nothing they had in their college programs really prepared them to do what they need to do ....They need to figure it out themselves so there is a lack of teaching across the board. It's contagious.

While there were no substantial, let alone radical changes in the instruction program, schools did make some organizational adjustments. These adjustments focused on scheduling changes of various sorts and adaptations in special program areas or grade-level units (Finkelstein, et al., 1998). Other "pockets of changes" were identified but not attributed to the reconstitution reform. That is, sample schools expanded their reading programs and their after-school tutoring programs, their after-hours mentoring initiatives and their summer programs. These developments were not necessarily initiated by the new principals or the new teachers, but they were seen as encouraging signs that the infusion of new faculty might permit or spark improvements in both the regular and supplemental components of the instructional

program. Some of the modest adjustments were not sustained. None of them translated into innovative instructional programs and classroom practices (Thrasher, 1999). Moreover, discipline issues in one site essentially displaced conversations about and efforts to implement any instructional innovations.

Perhaps its not surprising then, that the vast majority of informants within and across sites maintained that there was nothing distinctive about their reconstituted schools. Many made statements like "I don't see any differences between this school and other schools in the county; " or, "You can't tell this school from any other. That is a pity." Most subscribed to the following appraisal:

> There is still no difference between this school and any other school. I'm not phased by that anymore. The concept is gone. The promises were not kept. Test scores are the issue now. The rest doesn't seem to matter.

Multiple, Relentless Pressures for Standardization. The most pronounced pattern in our data on the instructional programs of schools was the attention given to testing. Indeed, improving test scores became the major mission of the reconstituted schools. By the second year of implementation, virtually all informants in all sites described the aims of the school in terms of state-required test scores. Words like "[the state test] is the big push" and "bring up [the state test scores]" were often the first and only responses to questions about the school's aims. At times informants would talk about improving reading, increasing parent involvement, or developing a "staff that works well together, that understands each other," but as they went on, it was clear that a major, if not the major reason to focus on those aims was to reach the ultimate goal, to "raise the scores." Indeed, the state test standards for satisfactory performance were seen as equivalent to the school's aims. Individual teachers expressed more personalized and more extensive aims. But for the school as a whole, virtually all informants in each site emphasized the centrality and the urgency of raising state-mandated test scores. Select but representative comments illustrate:

> Vision? I don't think there is one beyond getting the test scores up. No other mission has been conveyed.

> It has to happen this year. It will take 5-7 point gains or more for the state to say we are making progress. They may take us over.... There is a lot of pressure on us.

> The proof is in the pudding and the pudding is test scores. We have to raise them. That is all there is to it.

> It's a lot different than what we were told. Now its just raising test scores.
>
> Now we know what we were hired to do. All those things that were said and promised don't matter. It's the test scores, pure and simple. That's what matters. We have no choice. We have to do it.

Beyond becoming equated with the schools' visions, the preoccupation with test scores seemed to drive the instructional component of the school. That is not to say that the instructional program is closely aligned with the state tests, only that efforts to address the aims and ingredients of the instructional program were cast in state-test terms.

During the first year of implementation schools tried to align their instructional programs with test requirements, particularly state test requirements. Informants described efforts to expand the time dedicated to test preparation in both the regular program and after school activities. Aligning the instructional program with these accountability measures occupied a privileged position in school improvement plans, dominated discussions in planning meetings we observed, and appeared as a prevalent topic in interviews we conducted. Many noted that "The results from [state tests] drove the after school program. It seems like all we did was prepare for [state tests] all year."

There was also evidence that assessment was shaping decisions about the utilization of human resources. School personnel were discussing "[testing] positions," a term that referred to various ways to hire people to help teachers develop strategies that may inculcate the skills tapped on the state tests (Finkelstein, et al., 1998).

During the second year of implementation the test pressures persisted and intensified. It became very evident that test pressures were operating, directly and indirectly, to encourage standardization rather than innovation in the instructional program. Several themes illustrate.

First, analyses of school improvement plans and observations of instructional team meetings and school-wide planning sessions suggest site-level deliberations were framed by templates that are rooted in state testing requirements (Advocates for Children & Youth, 1998; Finkelstein, et al., 1998). Site participants tended to accept the items on the template as the topics they ought to consider. Thus the template created the impression that the template is what they must rely on in their planning and decisionmaking even though it fails to capture aspects of school improvement that teachers and administrators identify in private interviews, as more salient to them and more sensible for their school.

The template dictates the schools' long-term instructional goals and equates them to the state standards for satisfactory performance. The template also lays out a set of categories that site actors must complete. In the instructional planning sessions we observed, these categories tended to focus attention on state standards but they did not prompt discussions of alternative approaches to teaching and learning, let alone alternative approaches to school-wide strategies and structures for improvement. In these subtle but important ways, the template "pre-structured" and narrowed deliberations and contributed to the uniformity of, not the individuality of school improvement plans across sites.

Second, the pressure to raise test scores was often behind the pressure to standardize the content and delivery of the curriculum. As observational notes attest, all teachers had state-testing artifacts in their classrooms, main offices, conference rooms, media center and corridors. Teachers we observed referred to state-tests in their lessons, told students that their assignments were "practice for the [state tests]" and used the state tests as a primary justification for doing the assigned tasks. State tests were invoked in honor's assemblies, where principals encouraged students to be prepared to take the tests and to try hard because "that is your reason for being in school." Teachers reported that they were admonished to abide the administrative mantra, "if you can't test it, don't teach it." These admonitions reportedly encompassed both the content and the pace of instruction. As teachers said:

> We're told to concentrate only on those parts that get tested and to skip what is not tested. It doesn't matter if it doesn't make sense to the kids. It's like we are to just concentrate on the tests, not the kids.

> We are all supposed to be on the same page, doing things the same way. Why? To be ready for the tests.

> The [test-driven] structure leaves no room for freedom. We are charging through the curriculum.

Some of the admonitions took the form of direct orders to teachers to use the district-developed benchmarks which were viewed as practice for the state tests in their classrooms. As one testing coordinator said:

> Take 'em and use 'em. The more we use them the better our scores will be. Think of them as a teaching tool so that when the [students] get a new benchmark it will look familiar to them.... What we need to do is create the best testers I have ever seen.

New and experienced teachers alike talked about how the test pressures translated into administrative pressures for uniform teaching.[10] They talked about how they were required to "all be on the same page," to "do things the systems' way, not your own way." Several elaborated:

> I don't believe in using work sheets...I fought against it. I was told by [the administration] that all teachers in the pod most teach the same thing or get out...It was just another reason to leave.

> If you try to be creative it is frowned on. I like to do fun things but we are all supposed to do the same things. Well, if you do whatever everybody else is doing you get cookie-cutter teaching. That's not usually good teaching because you can't adapt to the kids you have.

Third, the multiple pressures to standardize the instructional program in order to do better on state-tests were reinforced by decisions regarding the content of professional development, the allocation of staff and the allocation of time. The professional development materials we reviewed, the inservice sessions we observed and the faculty meetings we attended all concentrated on topics that were tied to state testing requirements. All schools had testing coordinators. In several sites, teachers and specialists were given additional test-related responsibilities to carry out. In one school, a teacher was pulled from her classes several days a week to prepare materials for state-testing practice sessions that went beyond the required times set for the district benchmark tests, which, as noted are set up as "practice" for the state tests. In another, a classroom teacher was pulled to become a testing coordinator.

Teacher responses to the instructional directives they were given as well as their responses to the testing practice sessions suggest that the test emphasis and the resultant pressure to standardize instructional aims and activities were conditions they resented and at times resisted. As the following statements make clear, teacher acceded to the pressures despite their resentment of them.

> The testing has been exhausting and cruel. Our kids are not ready, Even our best students are struggling. It's been grueling. We could be doing something useful. This is just frustration.

> It's absurd. Testing shuts the whole system down for weeks. Everyone spends time preparing. We pull in all these subs so teachers can monitor tests rather than teach their kids. I just want it to be over.

We have to stop what we were doing and use these materials, which aren't well suited to our students.

In sum, over the course of our study we observed an intensification of pressure to perform on the state tests and a corresponding increase in the frequency of what teachers termed "intrusive orders to all be on the same page. No matter what happens you are to cover the material, whether you think the kids are ready or not." These comments suggest that there are forces, notably those emanating from the emphasis on state-required test results that are pressing as much if not more for standardization of curriculum and instruction than innovation in those areas. While our study does not allow us to ascertain whether the test pressures are stronger in reconstituted schools than in other sites, our data do suggest that the test pressures have taken center stage in the reconstituted schools.

Discussion

The case study findings we have reported here reveal stark contradictions between the "theories of action" embedded in the reform and the actual experiences with the reform. Such discrepancies are not new discoveries. Reform efforts often fall short of reform aspirations. Moreover, they often yield unintended effects that run counter to stated aims. Thus, the contradictions of greatest import may well be those lodged within the reform itself.

As this paper illustrates, the two-staged theory of action embraced contradictory approaches to school improvement. The initial action (the recall of all site personnel) was clearly a control strategy imposed from the top to correct performance problems at the bottom. But in this instance, reconstitution embodied a commitment strategy that relied on the dedication of site actors who were left to implement a vague vision of reform without the resources they anticipated and the support that the charge to create "break the mold schools" required. In essence, step two of the reconstitution reform rested on the tenets of commitment strategies but neglected to create the organizational conditions that might enable those strategies to take hold (Conley, 1988; Firestone & Pennel, 1993; Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990).

As a hybrid reform, the reconstitution effort we studied simultaneously employed control and commitment strategies in ways that accentuated the contradictory character of the two approaches. In essence, the district was to be both the punitive and supportive agent. The act of reconstitution implicitly if not explicitly blamed site participants for the condition of schools, released them from their roles and required their replacements to "remake" schools under tight time frames. The district promises of substantial support never materialized.

Under these conditions, reconstitution operated to undermine rather than engender commitment at the individual and institutional levels. The reform we examined contributed to educators' decisions to leave the targeted schools (often to work with similar populations in other schools or districts). Whether individuals remained or departed, the reform contributed to a pervasive sense of frustration, betrayal, disillusionment and distrust. Moreover, reconstitution created an environment that worked against the infusion of commitment as an institutional phenomenon. Reconstitution created more arduous work loads, strained relationships among and between faculty, administrators and students, and contributed to climates of confusion and suspicion. These organizational consequences made it hard to develop the broad-based collegial networks, collaborative interactions, substantive deliberations, shared understandings and collective purposes that are the hallmarks of the commitment-oriented approach to school improvement.

Exploratory case studies, by design, raise more questions than they answer. This study is no exception. Are the contradictions we observed inevitable? Do they plague all reconstitution reforms? Is possible to "blend and balance" control and commitment strategies so they do not pull in opposing directions?[11] Many argue that one key to meaningful education reform is finding the right combinations of mandates and supports, sanctions and inducements, carrots and sticks (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1987; Boyd, 1988; Bemelmans-Videc, et. al., 1998). Our study suggests that finding an efficacious balance may be considerably more difficult and risky than the rhetoric surrounding "results-based" reconstitution reforms recognizes. It may be exceptionally difficult in resource-challenged districts where real opportunity for support is limited but meaningful reform is most urgent.

Discovering that education policies have contradictory components that may work at cross-purposes is not a novel finding. After all, policies grow out of political processes fueled by conflicting interests and competing views. Hence they reflect the multiple agendas, mixed motives and compromise agreements that are part and parcel of the political process. But such discoveries are important because they may remind us to temper the promises that get attached to reform ventures. Our study suggests that policy advocates and policy makers should consider not only the promises of reconstitution reform but also the risks to the individuals and institutions they seek to reform.

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1. Reconstitution is used as threat in a number of settings that label schools "reconstitution eligible" or place them on "probation" (Wong, et. al., 1999). Reconstitution is a reality for schools where states or districts have actually implemented the notion of zero-based staffing (Khanna, et. al., 1999; & Hansen, Kraetzer, & Mukherjee, 1999).

2. The term is Argyris & Schon's (1982). These authors note how individuals espouse "theories of action," sets of principles and propositions to describe, assess and/or defend the effectiveness of their behavior. We extend that observation and suggest that policy initiatives embrace "theories of action," sets principles, propositions, orientations and related assumptions that can be used to illustrate, assess, and/or advocate the efficacy of policy interventions.

3. This study was supported by a partnership between the local district and an interdisciplinary study team. The partnership was initiated and developed by Barbara Finkelstein, principal investigator. We acknowledge Reem Mourad, Jean Snell, Kim Thrasher, Richard Hopkins, Heinrick Mintrop and Ryoko Kato Tsuneyoshi for their assistance with various aspects of this research project. We also extend our appreciation to the informants, administrative assistants, and office managers who invested a considerable amount of time participating in interviews, locating documents, reviewing records and otherwise supporting the data collection process. We are also grateful to the district and the University of Maryland for their support of this research.

4. At the end of the first year, we developed a composite case study report for the district. In preparation for our final report to the district, team members have developed site-specific case narratives that were reviewed by team members and will develop another composite case analyses.

5. Of the six reconstituted schools, three were designated to receive about $175,000 each from the district, presumably to offset the absence of grant monies from state, federal and local sources. These funds totalled $539,000 in the district's first year reform

budget. The district budget for the first year of the initiative included a total of $265,000 earmarked for staff development activities. The first $100,000 of this sum was budgeted for general staff development, such as courses and structured educational programs. The additional $165,000 was allocated for specially designed staff development programs for teachers in the six reconstituted schools and for tuition supplements for teachers pursuing Master's degrees, formal certification and general education. The district's first-year budget for the reconstitution initiative also included a total of $248,000 to establish the three person office noted above ($225,000 for salaries and $23,000 for office infrastructure).

6. No more than 19% of the students at any one of these schools had achieved satisfactory scores on state achievement tests in 1996, compared to 30% of students in the county and 42% of students in the state.

7. Numerous informants argued that if the reform had included incentives, (e.g., financial inducements or other benefits), the turnover rate might have been lower.

8.Since the major reason for returning mentioned by virtually all teachers was "the kids," and since teachers know they can work with similar populations in other settings, additional exits are certainly conceivable, if not probable. If the sense of betrayal lives on and the sense of obligation dies out (or when the literal three year commitment expires), reconstituted schools may experience even more departures unless something offsets that potential (e.g., change in school; reduction in jobs available in the district or region; infusion of incentives, supports that alter teachers' decision calculations).

9. Some informants claimed faculty tension and division did not break out on the basis of new and former faculty, nor on the basis of race, gender or ethnicity. However, infrequent but direct accusations of "reverse prejudice" in hiring new faculty for at least one school and references to various "cultural insensitivities" in conversations and actions, observations about "separate tables, black and what" and statements like "the race card gets used a lot" suggest race and culture may be part of the dynamic.

10. There are some teachers who say they are "free to do my job as I see fit." Some go further and claim that "teachers can get by with a lot here." While these sorts of comments suggest teachers, have a good bit of autonomy and can resist the pressures for standardization, that may or may not be the case. For instance, one new teacher talked about how pleased she was to be able to "do my own thing, make my own decisions, use my own judgement. There

is a lot of room for discretion." However, her example was that she got to decide "how the children would make the octopus, if they would just draw one on construction paper or use paper plates and streamers or something else... We all had to teach the o sounds and do the story of the octopus, but I still had a lot of freedom to decide how the kids would make the octopus [sic] that we put up on the walls."

11. Insofar as the discontinuities we reported reflect "enduring dilemmas," efforts to find an efficacious blend become much more problematic (Ogawa, et al., 1999).